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CIA Patrols Into China Said Halted

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The Nixon administration has ordered a halt to the dispatching of special CIA-supported teams of Laotian tribesmen into China on reconnaissance patrols from bases in northern Laos, according to well informed diplomatic sources.

These patrols—which sometimes range 200 miles inside China's Yunnan Province on road-watching, telephone-tapping missions—have been going on for a number of years, and their existence was known to the Peking regime.

Nevertheless, in a recent action designed to avoid any possible incident which could sour U.S. relations with Peking before President Nixon's forthcoming trip to the Chinese mainland, the forays have been halted, according to official sources here.

Some sources also suggest that the intelligence value of these operations may also have decreased somewhat.

Although no Americans go on these patrols, the Laotian hill tribesmen who carry them out are recruited, trained and equipped by the CIA, and the staging area for the patrols is a CIA outpost in northern Laos.

The Laotians are native to the border region, and the intelligence-gathering operation took advantage of the normal movements back and forth of these hill people.

While the White House, CIA and the U.S. embassy in Vientiane have never commented on or confirmed these activities—which reportedly date back to the Johnson administration—the patrols have been mentioned in numerous press reports by U.S. correspondents in Laos.

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In late 1970 and early this year, articles by Michael Morrow of Dispatch News Service International described the reconnaissance operations in considerable detail.

As recently as June 27, Arnold Abrams of The Philadelphia Bulletin reported that the raids were still being carried out despite the onset of Ping Pong Diplomacy.

The order to stop these patrols, according to informed sources, came very recently. Presidential aide Henry Kissinger's secret trip to Peking was made July 9 to 11.

In another move relating to the forthcoming Nixon visit, a press report last week, citing administrative sources, said the United States had suspended flights over Communist China by high-flying SR-71 spy planes and unmanned reconnaissance drones. This concession was also depicted as a move designed to avoid any incident which could interfere with the President's journey.

However, well placed defense and intelligence officials, asked about the reported suspension, said privately that to the best of their knowledge there had never been any SR-71 flights over the Chinese mainland.

Officials say there was a suspension of the unmanned drone flights some months ago, partly for diplomatic reasons and partly because of technical problems and the vulnerability of these drones to Communist gunners. At least two of the drones were shot down since late in 1969, one over the mainland and one over Hainan Island.

There have been flights of the older-vintage U-2 spy plane over mainland China carried out by the Nationalist Chinese, but officials hint that these flights, too, have not been scheduled for about a year.

The United States for some time has relied on satellites for photographic coverage of goings-on inside China. The SR-71s based in Asia, sources say, are used primarily for flights over North Korea.